

**"Mom ... Dad ... I am the Blur."**



The living room was dim, the soft glow of a single lamp casting long shadows across the walls. I stood there, nervous energy coursing through me, staring at my mom and dad as they sat on the couch.

Dad looked up from his tablet, raising a brow. For a moment, there was silence. Then he broke into laughter, the sound loud and carefree, completely at odds with the tension in my chest.

"Hahaha ... oh, Eric," he said, wiping a tear from his eye. "You're about to finish high school. This is no time for playing superhero dollhouse."

"I'm serious, Dad," I said, taking a step closer.

Mom folded her arms, tilting her head slightly. "Eric, honey, we've talked about this before. You've been through a lot with this government education program, and we're glad you're safe. But jokes like this don't help, especially with how worried we've been about you."

I felt my jaw tighten. "Mom, I'm not joking. I'm the Blur. The guy who's been all over the news? That's me."

She let out a small sigh, turning toward the kitchen. "Alright, Eric. I made dinner earlier. Why don't you head to the dining table? You must be hungry."

Hungry? Sure, maybe. But how could I eat when they didn't believe me?

"Mom!" I called after her. "Come on, I'm telling the truth!"

She didn't stop, busying herself with plates and utensils. My dad glanced at me, shaking his head. "Son, I don't know what you're trying to pull here, but you need to focus on your studies, not wild stories. Life isn't a comic book."

I clenched my fists, the frustration building. For a fleeting second, I considered just showing them—taking off in a blur of motion, flipping the lights off and on, or maybe even zipping around the room fast enough to ruffle their hair. But something held me back.

I thought of Ms. Ruvana. Of the way she cried late at night, when Ahnaf was hurt. The times she paced the hospital while Ahnaf was out fighting Khan. The weight of every tear she shed because her son lived in a world she couldn't protect him from.

Ahnaf had told me to come clean with my parents, to let them in on my world, but seeing them here, happy and relaxed, I just couldn't do it.

It wasn't about hiding my identity to protect them from villains. It was about protecting them from the burden of knowing.

I let out a breath, forcing a small smile. "Alright, fine. Forget I said anything."

My dad raised an eyebrow, looking skeptical but amused. "Good. Now, why don't you join your mom in the kitchen? Let's eat."

As I headed toward the dining table, Mom placed a steaming bowl of stew in front of me, her face lighting up with a warm smile. "Eat up, sweetheart. You've been working hard. Whatever's on your mind, just let it go for now, okay?"

I nodded, my voice quiet. "Thanks, Mom."



Dinner passed in a blur, but not the kind I was used to. My parents joked and laughed, oblivious to the weight sitting on my shoulders. And I just sat there, pretending to be their regular, not-so-extraordinary son.

### **Morning**

The sunlight crept through the blinds, filling the house with a warm glow. I was half-asleep, debating whether to get up, when the doorbell rang.

"Eric!" Mom called out from downstairs. "Oh, it's Ahnaf. Come here for a second—your friend is here!"



I groaned, throwing the blanket off and trudging down the stairs. As I rounded the corner, I saw Ahnaf standing at the door, his usual calm smile in place.



"Hello, Ms. Dunson," he said politely, his tone as smooth as ever. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine," Mom replied, her voice shifting into that half-motherly, half-skeptical tone she always used with my friends. "But you, young man—you

tell me how you're doing. You and Eric were both out there during all that chaos! I was worried sick!"

Ahnaf gave a light chuckle, scratching the back of his head. "I'm okay, really. The government study program had some special security measures in place for situations like that. They kept us safe."

Mom's expression softened, though she still gave him a knowing look. "Well, I'm glad to hear it. But don't think for a second that I'm letting you two off the hook so easily. You better stay out of trouble."

"Of course, Ms. Dunson," Ahnaf said smoothly, nodding. "Trouble's the last thing on our minds."

I stepped into the doorway, still rubbing sleep out of my eyes. "Hey, Ahnaf."

Mom glanced at me, folding her arms. "Oh, good. Your friend's here. Maybe he can knock some sense into you."

"Morning," Ahnaf said casually, giving me a small wave.

We both glanced at Mom. I could tell from her raised brow she was about to launch into one of her classic "don't think you're too old for me to worry about you" speeches, so I cut in quickly.

"Mom, can we—"

She raised a hand, already a step ahead. "I know, I know. You two want to hang out. Well, I won't stop you. Just promise me you'll stay away from the city. It's still a mess out there."

"Of course, Ms. Dunson," Ahnaf said with a reassuring nod. "We'll steer clear."

I grabbed my jacket from the hook by the door and turned back to her. "Thanks, Mom. Bye!"

"Bye, sweetie. Take care of yourselves," she called after us as I followed Ahnaf out the door.

As we stepped onto the porch, I turned back briefly, watching as Mom closed the door behind us. For a moment, I wondered if she'd ever guess just how much trouble we were already in—before we even got started.

## The Suburbs

The two of us strolled along the suburban footpath, the crisp morning air carrying faint sounds of hammers and drills as neighbors worked to rebuild their homes. The aftermath of the recent chaos was everywhere—broken fences, shattered windows, and debris scattered across lawns—but at least there was a sense of recovery in the air.

I glanced over at Ahnaf. He looked...distracted. Not his usual self.

"Dude, are you okay?" I asked, nudging him slightly.

He nodded, though his expression was tight. "Yeah. Just trying to get a hold of things."

"Anything happen last night? You mentioned you had some questions."

He stopped walking for a moment, letting out a slow breath. "Eric... have you ever wondered why Khan keeps coming after me?"

I frowned. "Well, maybe because he couldn't kill you at Steady Acres? I mean, that had to bruise his ego a little."

Ahnaf gave a small, humorless chuckle but shook his head. "That's what I thought too... until yesterday."

"Until?"

The wind blew lightly, ruffling his hair as he turned to face me fully. His tone was low, serious. "Until yesterday, when I was kneeling, powerless in front of him, and he told me something."

"What did he say?"

Ahnaf hesitated for a moment, his eyes scanning the horizon. "He said, 'There was a time when my planet prospered, with technology unlike anything you could imagine. Then something happened, and I had to send the only family I had—my son—through a pod. And I've been looking for him ever since. The pod was a time pod. The state would remain the same regardless of the time passed as long as someone is inside.'"

I blinked, processing the story. "Uh... okay, that's... insane. But what does that have to do with you?"

Ahnaf kept walking, his steps deliberate, as he continued. "Remember back when my dad told us the truth about The Heartlands? He said he'd been with them since 1998 and never saw me or my mom until years later."

I frowned, my mind trying to connect the dots. "Oh yeah... Now that you mention it, that *is* weird. I mean, how does that even—wait. Did your mom—"



"Eh, hell no!" Ahnaf cut me off quickly, looking disgusted.

I threw up my hands in mock surrender. "Whoops, whoops! My bad, man! Just trying to rule out the possibilities here!"

Ahnaf shook his head, but there was a faint smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. "Anyway. Mom told me something last night. Back in the year 2000, when she was driving home... she found me."

"Found you? Like, what—just sitting on the sidewalk waiting for a ride?"

"No, Eric." Ahnaf's voice was deadly serious now. "She said she found me in a giant circular pod... that fell out of the sky."

I stopped dead in my tracks, turning to him with wide eyes. "WHAT?! I was kidding, but are you serious right now?"

"Yes," Ahnaf said, his tone unwavering. "She told me she saw this burning streak in the sky, followed it to a crater, and there I was. A baby, inside a pod. The pod opened, and she took me home."

I stared at him, my mouth hanging open. "WHAAAATTT?! You fell out of the sky? Like, *literally*? And you didn't think to tell me this sooner?"

"I didn't know until last night!" Ahnaf said, exasperated.

I ran a hand through my hair, still trying to process. "Okay, okay, hold up. Let's piece this together. Khan's son was sent to Earth in a time pod. You were found in a time pod. Do you know what this means?"

Ahnaf stopped walking, turning to face me with an expression that was equal parts skeptical and resigned. "Yes, Eric. It means... I'm an alien."

I blinked. "...You're an alien."

"Yes."

"And not just any alien. You're *Khan's son*."

Ahnaf nodded solemnly. "Yes, Eric. I'm the son of Khan."

I couldn't help it—I started laughing. "Dude! You're like an alien prince! You're like, sci-fi royalty! Why don't you have a crown or something?"

Ahnaf rolled his eyes. "This isn't funny, Eric."

"No, no, it's not!" I said, trying to stifle my laughter. "It's just... it's a *lot*. But, wow, man. You've got the ultimate 'who's your daddy' story."



Ahnaf groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. "You're not taking this seriously."



"Hey, I'm trying! But come on, dude. You've got to admit, this is wild. You're literally *out of this world*."

Ahnaf sighed, his expression softening just a bit. "Yeah... it's wild. And terrifying. If Khan really is my father... what does that mean for me? For this planet?"

The humor drained from my face as I realized he was asking a serious question. "I don't know, man," I said quietly. "But whatever it means, you're still you. And we're in this together, okay?"

Ahnaf nodded, the tension in his shoulders easing just slightly. "Okay."

We found a bench under the shade of a tree, the cool breeze brushing against our faces as we sat. It was quiet except for the faint sound of hammers and drills in the distance, and I could feel the weight in the air between us.

I leaned back, trying to ease the tension. "You know, Ahnaf, you've been way too serious lately. When was the last time we talked like this? Like, just... normal stuff?"

Ahnaf glanced at me, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, look at you now," I said, gesturing at him. "When we first met, you were always cheerful. Always smiling. Remember that time you laughed off a fight with that bully? Or last year after we fought Fred, how we all walked out of school laughing like nothing happened? And Kelly—she was always there with us. We were never alone because of her. But now? You've changed, man."

Ahnaf looked down at his hands, silent for a moment. "I'm sorry. I'm just... worried."

"Worried? That's not something I ever thought I'd hear from you." I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "Kelly called you so many times yesterday. You didn't pick up once. She texted me all night, and I had to keep her from breaking down. She's worried *sick* about you, Ahnaf."

Ahnaf's jaw tightened. "I know. But I don't want to drag her into all of this."

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "Don't you get it? By not being there for her, you're dragging her in even more. Look at yourself. You came to see me today, but did you even bother to text her? Call her? She's still messaging me, man. She's terrified for you. You've got a responsibility to her too, right?"

Ahnaf's shoulders slumped, and he let out a deep sigh. "You're right, I suppose. But what if... what if I'm not there for her much longer?"

His voice cracked slightly, and I sat up straight. "What are you talking about?"

He stared ahead, his eyes distant. "September 22nd. That's when Khan's coming back. He told me, Eric. He's going to kill every last one of my loved ones right in front of me if I can't stop him. And you saw what happened yesterday. I gave it everything I had—for her, for you, for everyone I care about—and it wasn't enough. Eric... he was using *10%* of his strength. Just 10%. How am I supposed to defeat him in a month?"

The desperation in his voice hit me hard. I swallowed the lump in my throat, trying to stay composed. "We'll figure something out. There has to be a way. But shutting Kelly out isn't going to make you stronger."

He shook his head, his voice trembling. "And what if staying close to her gets her killed? Don't you see? If I don't push her away, he'll come for her. For all of you. I... I'm not strong enough, Eric. And if I stay... I'll doom everyone I love."

I stared at him, speechless for a moment. I'd never seen Ahnaf like this—defeated, hopeless.

"I think..." he continued, his voice barely a whisper, "I think I should just leave. Go somewhere far away. Away from you. Away from Mom. Away from everyone."

**"And away from love?"**

The voice wasn't mine.

We both looked up, startled. Kelly stood a few feet away, her arms crossed and her eyes glistening. Her voice was steady, but the pain behind it was clear.





Ahnaf's breath caught in his throat. "Kelly..."

She stepped closer, her gaze locked onto his. "Is that your plan? To run away from everyone who loves you? From me?"

Ahnaf was frozen, his face a mixture of shock and guilt.

I sat back, watching the two of them. For once, I didn't have anything to say. This wasn't my moment—it was theirs.



Kelly's footsteps were heavy as she approached, her eyes red and swollen from the pain and tears of last night. Her voice cracked as she spoke, but the anger in her tone was unmistakable.

"So, you're planning to just run away from the people who love you? The same people you claim to love back? And for what? Just so we can die anyway?"

I tensed up immediately, sensing the storm brewing. As Kelly's voice grew sharper, I instinctively started sliding a little further down the bench, trying to give them space.

Ahnaf stammered, his confidence cracking under her glare. "Um, no, of course not. I didn't mean—"



"Oh really?" Kelly interrupted, her voice rising. "You think Khan—*or whatever his stupid name is*—is just going to leave us all alone once you're gone? You think he's going to pack up and take a vacation because the great Ahnaf disappeared? No! He'll kill us anyway, Ahnaf! To him, we're nothing but *ants*! Ants that he can step on whenever he wants!"

Her words hit like a slap, and Ahnaf looked completely deflated. Meanwhile, I shuffled another inch away, pretending to study the cracks in the sidewalk.

"But what can I do?" Ahnaf said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Kelly's eyes widened in disbelief, and her hands balled into fists. "What can *we* do that *you* can't?" she shot back, her voice trembling with frustration. "We don't have powers, Ahnaf. We can't punch a hole in boulders, or fight someone like him and live to tell the tale. *You* can. That's why you *have* to stand up and fight. Fight until you can't anymore. Fight for us!"

The intensity of the moment was too much, and I decided to make a strategic retreat. I scooted another inch down the bench, trying to disappear into the background.

"*JUST GET OFF THE BENCH, YOU DUMMY!*" Kelly suddenly yelled, her frustration boiling over.

Startled, I threw my hands up in surrender. "Alright, alright, my bad! The seat's all yours!"

I stood up quickly, stepping aside as if the bench had become a live wire. Kelly didn't waste a second, plopping herself down right next to Ahnaf with a dramatic huff.

Ahnaf looked between the two of us, caught between guilt and confusion. "Kelly, I—"

"Don't. Just don't," Kelly said, cutting him off. Her voice softened, but the weight of her emotions didn't lift. "Do you even understand what it's like for me? To watch you push me away when all I want is to be there for you? I'm scared too, Ahnaf. But I'd rather face it together than let you run off and leave me behind."

I stood a few feet away, watching the scene unfold. For once, I stayed quiet. No jokes, no commentary. This wasn't my fight.

Ahnaf's head hung low, and he took a deep breath. "I... I just don't want to lose you."

"And you won't," Kelly said firmly. "Not if you stop trying to do everything alone. We're in this together, Ahnaf. All of us. You, me, Eric, your mom—everyone. So stop pretending like the weight of the world is only on your shoulders. It's not."

Ahnaf's eyes glistened, and he nodded slowly. Kelly reached out, placing her hand on his. "We'll figure it out. Together."

In the background, I cleared my throat. "So, uh, does this mean I can sit back down, or...?"

Kelly shot me a glare that could've frozen a volcano, and I took another step back. "Got it, I'll stand. This looks like a sitting-for-two situation."

Kelly leaned closer, her voice heavy with frustration but tinged with desperation. "You know what your problem is, Ahnaf? You think carrying this weight on your own is noble. You think pushing us all away will somehow keep us safe. But it doesn't—it just makes everything worse!"

Ahnaf rubbed his face, his exhaustion clear. "Kelly, you don't understand. If I fail, it's not just about me. It's about *everyone*. And I can't risk you getting caught in the crossfire. Do you know what that would do to me? To see you —"

Kelly didn't let him finish. "You're acting like I don't have a choice in this! Like I'm some fragile flower who can't decide whether or not to stand by you. Newsflash, Ahnaf: I *chose* to be here. I chose to love you, and I'm not going to just walk away because things are hard!"

Ahnaf's voice rose, frustration bubbling to the surface. "This isn't about things being hard, Kelly! This is life or death. Do you know what Khan said to me yesterday? He told me he'd kill everyone I care about, starting with you. Do you know what it's like to hear that and feel powerless to stop it?"

Kelly's eyes narrowed, her voice dropping into a low, fiery tone. "Do you know what it's like to sit at home and wonder if you're even alive? To text you over and over, hoping for a reply, praying that you haven't already been ripped away from me? Because that's what you're putting me through!"

Ahnaf shook his head, his voice breaking. "I don't want you to live in fear because of me."

Kelly took a deep breath, her hands trembling slightly. "Fear is part of loving someone like you, Ahnaf. I get that. But you don't get to make choices for me. You don't get to decide that running away is better than letting me stand beside you."

Ahnaf hesitated, looking away. "I just don't know if I can win, Kelly. He's stronger than me. Smarter, faster—"



Kelly stopped, turning to face him. "Maybe you're not supposed to beat him alone. Maybe that's the whole point! You have people who care about you, Ahnaf. You're the one who's shutting them out."

Ahnaf looked down, his voice trembling. "If I let you in, and something happens to you..."

Kelly interrupted, stepping right in front of him. "Something's going to happen to me whether you let me in or not. Don't you get it? You running away doesn't protect me, it just leaves me alone and terrified."

Ahnaf opened his mouth to reply, but Kelly didn't give him the chance. Her voice softened slightly, though the fire in her eyes remained. "You're like the nexus that holds us all together, Ahnaf. Without you, we're lost. And if you run, we'll fall apart."

Ahnaf froze, the word hitting him like a lightning bolt. His eyes widened. "Nexus."

Kelly frowned, confused by his sudden reaction. "What?"

Ahnaf's eyes lit up, as if a switch had just flipped. His earlier despair was replaced with a spark of realization. "Yes... you're right... NEXUS."

I blinked, confused. "Nexus? What are you talking about?"

"The Nexus Crystal!" Ahnaf said, his voice rising with a new-found energy. "Remember how Leonis used to get those insane bursts of power out of nowhere during the raids?"

I tilted my head, piecing it together. "Yeah, but... ohhhh shit." My eyes widened as the full picture came into view. "You're right! The Nexus Crystal!"

Ahnaf nodded fervently, pacing in front of me like a man possessed. "Exactly! If we can get the crystal and channel its power, we can use it to boost our strength. Maybe even enough to defeat Khan."

I smirked, leaning back on the bench. "This coming from Mr. 'No shortcuts, hard work builds character'? What happened to that guy?"

Ahnaf cracked a grin, a rare moment of levity breaking through the tension. "Screw that guy. Lives are on the line. If there's even a chance we can stand up to Khan with the Nexus Crystal, we've got to take it."

Kelly, who had been silently fuming until now, crossed her arms and glared at us. "What are you two even talking about?"

I turned to her, casually waving a hand. "Oh, you know, just a mystical crystal that temporarily gives you powers so you can fight off evil intergalactic overlords. The usual superhero stuff."

Kelly narrowed her eyes at me. "Eric, stop being an idiot."

"Fine, fine," I said, holding up my hands. "Long story short: there's a crystal, it gives powers, and Ahnaf thinks we can use it to beat Khan."

"It's not just thinking," Ahnaf said firmly, stepping in. "It's hope. Real hope. Kelly... this is our best shot."

Kelly rolled her eyes but didn't say anything, her anger visibly simmering.

"Hey, Kelly," I said, shooting her a grin. "See? He's already making a plan. Pretty impressive for someone who was about to quit five minutes ago, huh?"

Ahnaf glanced at me, giving me a subtle glare. "Eric, not helping."

"Alright, I'll stop," I said, shrugging and leaning back again. "But you've got to admit, this is starting to sound like a plan."

Ahnaf turned to Kelly, his expression softening. "And it's all thanks to you."

Kelly raised an eyebrow. "Me? I didn't even—"

Before she could finish, Ahnaf leaned in, pressing his lips to hers. She froze for a moment, clearly taken off guard, but then the tension in her body melted away. Slowly, she returned the kiss, her hands gently resting on his arms.

I watched them for a moment before awkwardly standing up from the bench. "Well... I guess I'll just... yeah, I'll be over there." I backed away a few steps, giving them their space but not without muttering, "Man, they really should warn people when they're about to do that."

Ahnaf didn't even seem to notice me leaving, his focus entirely on Kelly. For the first time in what felt like forever, there was something tangible in his voice—hope. And that was something I wasn't about to ruin.



## **The Nexus Facility**

"Sir, we ran the tests thoroughly again last night. The results are conclusive. It's true."

The Nexus Facility buzzed faintly with activity. In the private chambers of Director Leonis, a dim blue light from holographic displays bathed the room. The air was heavy with tension as Dr. Yoru stood before him, holding a tablet filled with unsettling data.

Leonis leaned back in his chair, rubbing his temples. "Run them again tonight."

Dr. Yoru blinked, momentarily caught off guard. "Sir, we've triple-checked the data. The results haven't wavered. An entire galaxy—"

Leonis cut him off, his voice low but firm. "You're telling me that *Celestion-87*, a galaxy 12.4 billion light-years away, the very foundation of our oldest cosmic records... just *vanished*? Without a trace? That's what you're saying?"

Dr. Yoru hesitated, his eyes flickering to the holographic display where a 3D model of the galaxy once stood. Now, there was only an empty void. "Yes, sir. We've accounted for every possible obstruction—stellar collapse, black holes, gravitational lensing—but there's nothing. The galaxy didn't just fade or fall out of view. It's gone."

Leonis leaned forward, his fingers steepled, his expression unreadable. "This doesn't make sense. A galaxy of that size, that age—it should be detectable in some capacity. What about subspace anomalies? Wormhole activity?"

Dr. Yoru shook his head. "We checked those metrics as well. Nothing. It's as if Celestion-87 simply ceased to exist."

Leonis's jaw tightened. "An anomaly, you say?"

Dr. Yoru nodded, though uneasily. "Yes, sir. One that defies every model we've ever used to understand the universe."

Leonis leaned back again, exhaling sharply. "As if we don't have enough anomalies to deal with already." His voice carried a sharp edge, but beneath it was an undertone of unease.





Dr. Yoru paused, then nodded reluctantly. "Understood, sir. But we should prepare for the possibility that we're dealing with forces far beyond our current understanding. If this isn't isolated—"

Leonis's eyes narrowed. "If you're suggesting there's a pattern, then we're in more trouble than I thought. Especially with Redford locking down half of our facilities. Resources are scarce as it is."

Dr. Yoru grimaced. "Mr. Redford's interference has set us back significantly. Without full access, it's going to be nearly impossible to determine the cause of this... event."

Leonis raised a hand. "Speculation isn't going to help us. Focus on the data we have. Monitor surrounding galaxies. Expand our observational parameters. If this anomaly spreads, I want to know before it becomes catastrophic."

Dr. Yoru inclined his head. "Yes, Director."

Before the tension in the room could deepen, there was a knock at the door.

Voice: "Director Leonis?"

Leonis glanced at the door, irritation flickering across his face. "Yes? Who is it?"

Security Guard: "Apologies for the interruption, sir. Ahnaf and Eric are at the main floor lift. Should I let them in?"

Leonis's expression shifted, the tension easing slightly but not disappearing entirely. He gestured toward the guard. "Let them in. But keep this room restricted. Dr. Yoru, we'll have to continue this later."

Dr. Yoru hesitated, as if he had more to say, but thought better of it. "Understood, sir."

### **A Few Moments Later**

Director Leonis was focused on the holographic display, his expression intense as he studied the void where a galaxy once stood. Another knock came at the door, pulling him out of his thoughts.

Leonis said, "Who is it?"

I called back, "Hey, Mr. Leonis! It's me, Eric, and Ahnaf."

Leonis leaned back and pressed a button on his desk, opening the door. "Ah, come in."

Ahnaf and I walked in, both looking a little worse for wear but determined. As we approached the nearby chairs, Leonis gestured for us to sit.

"And here I thought after the chaos yesterday, you two wouldn't show up until next week," Leonis said with a small chuckle. "Exceeding my expectations, eh?"



I flopped into a chair, rubbing my eyes dramatically. "Eh, nothing like that. Too much tension, too little sleep thanks to... well, everything."

"What's important is that you're both fine," Leonis said, his tone softening. "And thanks to James, the city is safe."

Ahnaf leaned forward, concern flickering in his eyes. "How is James?"



Leonis sighed, his expression tightening. "He's stable but still in a coma. Intensive care is doing their best. He just hasn't woken up yet, but don't worry."

"Damn," I muttered, shaking my head. "I wish I could do something to help."

Leonis gave me a reassuring look. "Focus on what you can handle, Eric. James would want that. Besides, I assume you're not here for small talk. You've got something pressing on your mind, don't you?"

Ahnaf leaned forward, looking surprisingly serious at first. "Yes, Mr. Leonis."

Leonis raised an eyebrow. "Alright then, how can I help?"

Ahnaf's serious demeanor melted into a sly grin. "When do I get a suit?"

Leonis blinked, caught completely off guard. "Eh? A suit?"

"Huh?" I added, equally surprised.

Ahnaf's face lit up with a mix of excitement and mock indignation. "Yeah, a suit! Eric got one. James got one. Where's mine?"

Leonis stared at him for a moment before a hearty laugh burst out. "Oh... OH! Haha... oh, the youth these days. And here I thought you had something serious to discuss! A suit, of all things!"

Ahnaf crossed his arms, pretending to pout. "Hey, come on! First things first! One step at a time, right? So where's my suit?"

Leonis smirked, leaning back in his chair. "Well, the suit thing was... spontaneous. I believe Ramsey himself designed it on the private jet while returning with Eric and James. He's not exactly a full-time tailor, you know."

Ahnaf's eyes widened in mock amazement. "Whoa! Ramsey is a tailor now? That's it! I'm calling Ramsey. I want him to make me a suit."

Leonis shook his head, still chuckling. "Unfortunately, Ramsey's hands are full with the Heartlands situation. But don't worry. We have plenty of specialists who can—"

"Nah, no thanks," Ahnaf interrupted, waving his hand dismissively. "I want the 'Ramsey special.' Did you see Eric's suit? Perfect fit! I'll wait."



I couldn't help but chime in, grinning. "You just want it because of the pockets, don't you?"

"What? No!" Ahnaf exclaimed before hesitating. "...Okay, maybe a little."

Leonis shook his head, a soft laugh escaping him. "Ahnaf, no matter how strong you grow, you'll always be a child at heart, won't you?"

Ahnaf leaned back, grinning triumphantly. "Hey, I'm no kid! I'm going to be 19 soon, remember?"

"Yeah," I said, smirking, "and you're asking for a superhero suit like it's your birthday present."

The room erupted in laughter. Even Leonis, usually so composed, couldn't hold back a genuine chuckle. It was a rare moment of levity, the kind we all needed after the previous day's chaos.

Leonis wiped a tear from the corner of his eye, the laughter fading into a warm smile. "Alright, Ahnaf. When Ramsey's free, I'll see if I can arrange for your suit. But you'd better be ready to earn it."

The mood in the room shifted, becoming lighter, warmer. For a moment, the weight of their responsibilities faded, replaced by the simple joy of camaraderie. Director Leonis leaned forward, clasping his hands together as the soon laughter died down, the room's atmosphere growing serious again.

Leonis said, "Alright, Ahnaf. What's on your mind?"

Ahnaf straightened up in his seat, his tone steady but weighty. "It's about Khan... as I said yesterday, he'll be back on September 22nd—next month. And if I fail to stop him, he will end us all."

Leonis nodded, his face darkening. "That's an imminent threat, and we'll be taking measures to—"

Ahnaf interrupted, shaking his head. "There are no measures, Leonis. We all know that."

Leonis's lips curled into a faint smirk. "Careful with what you wish for, Ahnaf. Maybe I might surprise you."

Ahnaf gave a dry laugh, leaning back slightly. "Heh, well, if you say so. But I've come up with a better solution."

Leonis raised an eyebrow. "You? A better solution? Haha, tell me about it."

Ahnaf leaned forward, his voice carrying a spark of determination. "The Nexus Shard."

Leonis tilted his head. "What of it?"

I chimed in, leaning in as well. "Remember our training at the airfield? How it reacted to us when you brought it for those tests?"

Leonis frowned in thought. "Yes, but it didn't show much of an eff—"

"Oh, come on, Leonis," I said, cutting him off. "Those creepy shadow things were after it, and that Gypsy woman showed up out of nowhere. And when you held it, it gave you powers!"

Leonis rubbed his chin, recalling the event. "Oh, that... well, yes, but it was only temporary. The power vanished the moment I let go of it."

"Yeah," Ahnaf said, leaning forward, "but don't you think we need any kind of boost? Temporary, permanent, whatever it takes."

Leonis leaned back, his expression guarded. "Well, I could've helped with that. But that man you met yesterday—"

"That assface Redford?" Ahnaf interjected, his voice dripping with irritation.



Leonis smirked faintly. "Eh, yes... that guy. Well, he's locked access to the Nexus Shard. Anything involving it consumes significant resources, and with the current state of things..."

I frowned, sitting up straighter. "But I'm sure we can explain the situation to him! If Khan wins, then—"

Leonis held up a hand, cutting me off. "Eric, Redford would rather see the world burn than go back on his decisions. Our only hope is Ramsey finishing what he's doing as soon as possible."

"But Leonis," Ahnaf pressed, his voice rising with urgency, "without the shard —"

Leonis held up his hand again, his tone calm but firm. "I know, Ahnaf. I know. I'll see what I can do when the opportunity arises. But in the meantime, we still have the training facilities here. You can use them to prepare and improve as much as possible before the day comes."

I perked up at the suggestion. "Whoa, really? That would help us a lot. Show us the way!"

Ahnaf, however, crossed his arms, his voice carrying a note of defiance. "I'm not gonna train here."

Leonis raised an eyebrow at Ahnaf's declaration. "You don't want to train here? Why not?"

I turned to Ahnaf, incredulous. "Huh? But why?"

Ahnaf leaned back in his seat, arms crossed. "I've had enough training."

I stared at him, flabbergasted. "Dude... the last time you trained was at the airfield. Even I've had more exposure than you."

Ahnaf shrugged nonchalantly. "And I still stood toe-to-toe with Khan, even though that was only 10% of his power."

I threw my hands up. "Don't get cocky!"

Ahnaf smirked. "Oh yes, *that* thing."

I blinked, confused. "What thing?"

Ahnaf turned to Leonis, his expression turning serious. "Director Leonis."

Leonis straightened. "Yes?"

Ahnaf hesitated for a moment before continuing, "When I was fighting Khan, and losing to him... suddenly, my strength grew exponentially. But I can't feel that strength anymore. Is there any reason for it? I mean, I always grow stronger, but it's never been like that before."

Leonis's gaze sharpened. "And you don't feel any of it anymore?"

Ahnaf nodded firmly. "Yes, I'm sure of it. It's never happened before."

Leonis leaned forward, his curiosity piqued. "Tell me more about how it arose."

Ahnaf sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "I was standing there, helpless. Nothing I did put a dent in Khan. He was thrashing me around, from one skyscraper to another. You saw that, right? But then... I felt something inside me. I don't know where it came from or what it was, but I felt this massive surge of energy and power coursing through my body. And, well... I felt invincible. Suddenly, I was going head-to-head with Khan."

Leonis sat back in his chair, a contemplative look on his face. Then he said a single phrase: "Code Breaker."

Ahnaf furrowed his brows. "What?"

I nearly fell out of my seat. "WHAT?! NO WAY. Me and James had to take *Step-Up-2* just to get to that level!"

Leonis stood, a rare smile spreading across his face. "And Ahnaf did it without it. That is a magnificent breakthrough! You just might be the first human to achieve that level naturally!"

Ahnaf blinked, utterly lost. "Huh? What is Code Breaker? I don't understand what you're saying."

Leonis began to pace, his hands clasped behind his back as he explained. "The human body, Ahnaf, is a fascinating thing. Especially someone like you. It holds secrets untold, secrets that are better left buried to prevent our own destruction. But every now and then, one of those secrets reveals itself."

Ahnaf leaned forward, intrigued. "What kind of secrets?"

Leonis stopped pacing and turned to him, his tone taking on a lecturing quality. "We've spent years analyzing this at the Nexus Facility, and we came to a conclusion: the human body can achieve three stages of extraordinary capability before it ultimately gives way and destroys itself. Code Breaker is the first of those stages."

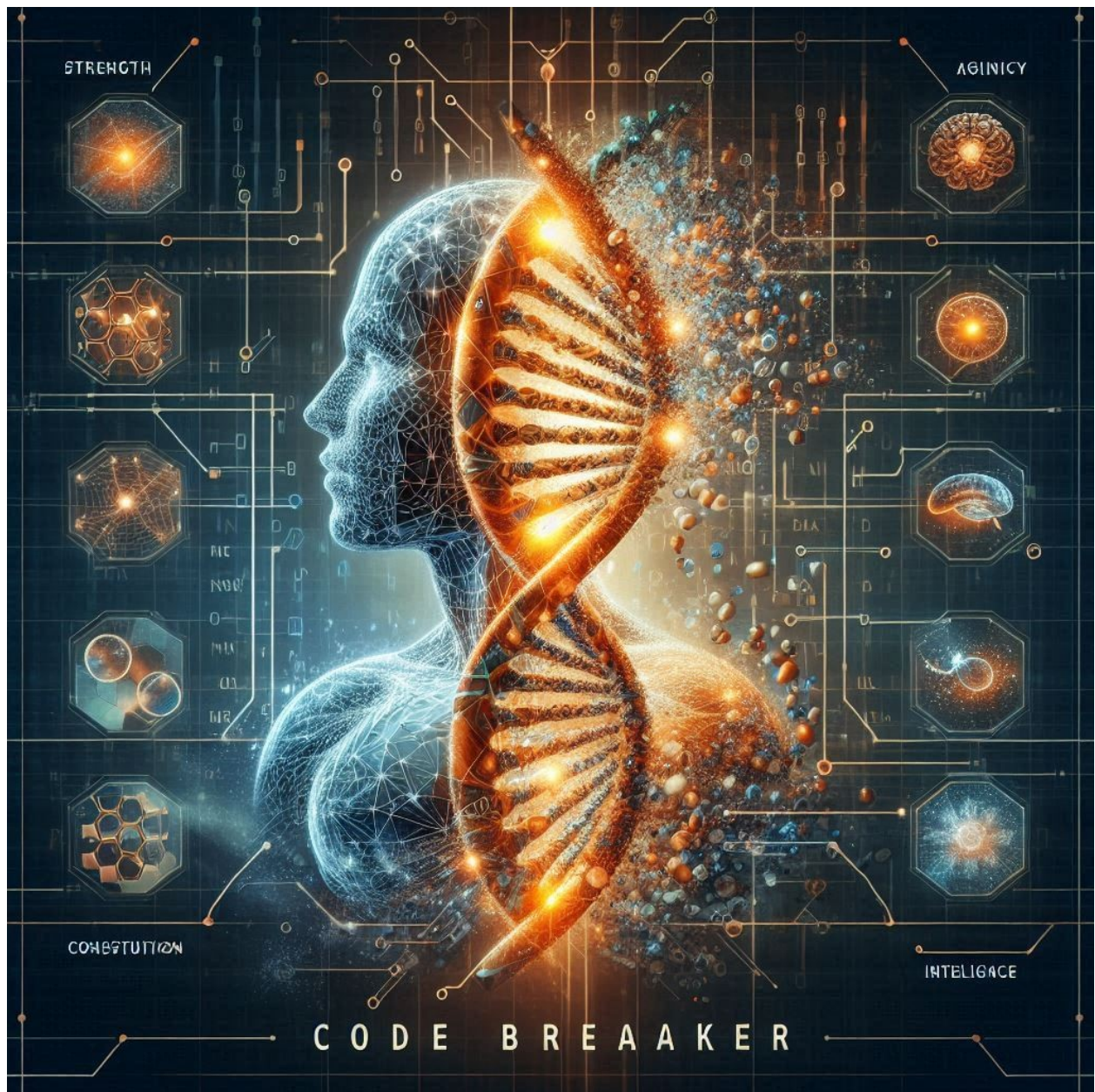
Ahnaf's eyes widened. "What does it do?"



Leonis nodded, his voice measured. "Code Breaker is when we, quite literally, break through our genetic code and unlock exponential growth in our capabilities. This stage allows us to enhance our physical and mental attributes to an incomparable height, reaching the peak of what we're capable of in our entire lifetime."

Ahnaf's jaw dropped slightly. "Like what?"

Leonis raised a hand, counting off examples on his fingers. "Imagine being able to lift ten times your body weight, or run faster than any human ever could. Reflexes so sharp you could dodge bullets. Endurance that lets you keep going long after anyone else has collapsed. And your mind—working at a speed and efficiency that would make you a genius in any field."



Ahnaf leaned back in awe. "Woah..."

Leonis chuckled softly. "Indeed. And you, Ahnaf, might be the first person to have done it without external intervention."

Ahnaf leaned forward, his curiosity now fully piqued. "And the other two stages? What comes after Code Breaker?"

Leonis paused, his gaze thoughtful as he considered how to explain. Finally, he spoke, his tone measured but intense. "The next stage, Ahnaf, is what we call ***Balance Breaker.***"

Ahnaf frowned slightly. "Balance Breaker? What does that mean?"

Leonis began pacing again, his hands clasped behind his back. "The human body, even after breaking through its genetic code, is designed to maintain a delicate balance. This balance ensures that no single attribute—what we might call 'stats'—grows excessively high in comparison to others. It's a safeguard, ensuring we remain functional, healthy, and stable."

Ahnaf nodded slowly, following along. "So what happens in the Balance Breaker stage?"

Leonis stopped and turned to face him, his eyes sharp. "Balance Breaker does exactly what the name implies. It shatters that equilibrium. It allows the attributes most useful to you—strength, speed, endurance, reflexes, whatever they may be—to skyrocket to unimaginable levels. You'd wield power beyond anything you've ever dreamed of."

Ahnaf's eyes widened, his mind racing. "That sounds... incredible."

Leonis held up a hand, his tone shifting to one of warning. "Incredible, yes. But also incredibly dangerous. The strain it places on the body is unthinkable. Muscles would tear themselves apart under the weight of their own strength. Bones would groan and crack under the pressure. Even your mind would begin to fray, struggling to keep pace with the heightened demands."





Ahnaf swallowed hard. "So it's not sustainable."

Leonis nodded grimly. "Exactly. The mental and physical toll is immense. While the power you'd wield would be unparalleled, the cost is your body's natural harmony—its ability to function without destroying itself. It's not just a question of whether you *can* wield such power, but whether your body could withstand it, even for a moment."

Ahnaf leaned back in his chair, processing the information. "That's... a lot to take in."

Leonis allowed himself a small smile. "It's not a stage to be taken lightly, Ahnaf. Balance Breaker is a force of nature within oneself. But it's also a risk—a gamble that could cost more than just your strength."

Ahnaf leaned forward, eyes locked on Leonis. "Noted. But what about the last one? The final stage?"

Leonis let out a long breath, his expression hardening. "The last stage... is what we call ***Limit Breaker***."

Ahnaf's brows knitted in confusion. "Limit Breaker? Sounds... final."

Leonis nodded slowly, his tone grave. "Final is exactly the word for it. This stage represents the ultimate human boundary—the point beyond which our bodies were never meant to go. Even after breaking through your genetic code and shattering the balance, there's always a natural limit. A threshold that keeps us tethered to what we are. *Limit Breaker* obliterates that threshold entirely."

Ahnaf's voice dropped to a whisper. "What happens then?"

Leonis's gaze turned distant, as though recalling something he'd rather forget. "Imagine being able to move at the speed of light, to think faster than any computer ever created, to heal from any wound in mere moments. The power you'd wield would be nothing short of godlike."

Ahnaf's eyes widened. "That sounds..."

Leonis cut him off, his tone sharp. "Incredible? Yes. But also catastrophic. The risks are beyond anything you can comprehend. The body is pushed to its absolute breaking point. Muscles, organs, even the cells themselves—they start to unravel under the strain. The energy required to sustain that level of power begins to devour you from the inside out."





Ahnaf, his voice tinged with unease. "So... anything beyond that, and you're done for."

Leonis nodded, his expression grim. "Exactly. Anything beyond this stage leads to total collapse. The strain, the imbalance, the sheer overwhelming force—it all comes at a cost. *Limit Breaker* isn't just a name. It's a warning. Pushing past it doesn't just mean risking your life. It means certain destruction."

Ahnaf sat back, digesting the gravity of the information. "So... it's a last resort. A gamble."

Leonis nodded, his voice softer now. "Not just a gamble, Ahnaf. A sacrifice. One that should never be taken lightly."

I raised a hand, as if in a classroom. "And what about the others? Balance Breaker and Limit Breaker? Do they scale too?"

Leonis's expression turned more somber. "That's the thing. We've never had anyone reach those stages—at least, not in a way we could measure. Balance Breaker and Limit Breaker, they're... speculative. All we know is that they go beyond Code Breaker, but just how far beyond, no one can say for sure."

Ahnaf frowned. "So, it's all guesswork?"

Leonis shrugged. "More or less. We've theorized that Balance Breaker would push the most useful attributes to their absolute limits, but at the cost of overwhelming the body's natural equilibrium. The toll would be immense. And Limit Breaker? That's a different beast entirely. It's said to obliterate every boundary—physical, mental, even spiritual. But no one's ever achieved it to confirm it. I mean .... Not that we know of. And to be honest, we wouldn't want anyone to. The risk isn't just to the individual—it's to everything around them. The sheer energy released at those levels could devastate entire cities."

Ahnaf looked down at his hands, flexing his fingers as if testing his own strength. "But Code Breaker... that's possible. And it's something I've already touched, even if just for a moment."

Leonis smiled faintly. "It's a rare gift, Ahnaf. Few ever get a taste of it, let alone achieve it naturally. What you've accomplished is extraordinary. But remember, it's not just about reaching those stages. It's about being ready for what comes with them. That power—no matter how incredible—comes with a responsibility you can't ignore."

I smirked. "You're really laying on the wisdom today, Leonis."

Leonis laughed. "Someone has to. Ramsey's too busy with Heartlands to lecture you two properly."



I looked at Ahnaf with a puzzled expression. "See there, champ? The stronger we are, the better! So, let's train!"

Ahnaf, without missing a beat, shook his head. "I'm going home."

I blinked, caught off guard. "Huh? But why? Didn't you hear all that? We're talking about unlocking powers beyond anything we've ever seen!"

Ahnaf smiled softly, a hint of mischief in his eyes. "Well, you can train... I'll go to the people I love, who love me... and train myself my own way."



I looked at Ahnaf, watching him leave, and I muttered to myself, half to him and half to the world around us. "You're really going to do this alone again, huh?" I didn't like the thought of him going off by himself, but something was different this time. There was a quiet peace in his stride, a calm that told me he wasn't just running from battle or chasing strength. He was finding something within himself—something I didn't quite understand, but something I had to respect.

He was alone, but maybe not truly alone. Maybe, just maybe, Ahnaf was drawing strength not from the training, not from the fight, but from the people who cared for him, from the moments that grounded him, from the resolve he carried deep inside.

I shook my head and let out a small laugh, though it was empty. "You're too stubborn for your own good, man."

But even as I said it, a small part of me knew he was right. Maybe this wasn't the time for more training, more power. Maybe the real strength came from everything else—the things they were fighting to protect.

Ahnaf stopped a few paces away, turning back to look at me with a half-smile. "Don't worry about me, Eric. I'll come back stronger than ever."

I raised an eyebrow, a hint of a grin tugging at my lips. "You better, or I'll never let you hear the end of it."

Ahnaf chuckled softly, nodded, and then turned to leave.

I stood there for a moment, watching him disappear into the distance, a quiet determination settling in my chest. No matter where this path took us, no matter how far Ahnaf walked alone, I knew we'd always find our way back to each other. We always did.

With a deep breath, I finally turned and walked back inside. The day wasn't over, and the fight ahead was just beginning.



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The air in this place—if it could even be called air—felt dense, oppressive, as though it carried the weight of unspoken truths and forgotten nightmares. The void stretched infinitely in all directions, a space without beginning or end, where even the concept of light and shadow seemed meaningless. No walls. No sky. No ground. Only a shapeless abyss, alive with faint murmurs, like whispers just beyond comprehension.



A voice broke the silence, low and resonant, dripping with a malice so cold it chilled even the emptiness itself.

***"Amusing."***

The word rippled outward, the vibrations carving strange, momentary patterns into the void. Spirals. Fractals. Symbols that defied reason. They flickered and faded, like the void itself recoiled from meaning.

***"The cycle,"***

the voice intoned, slow and deliberate,

***"always the same. The same struggle. The same futility."***

A pause, pregnant with a terrible weight.

***"And yet, it persists."***

A sickly pulse emanated from the heart of the abyss, growing stronger, feeding on the words as they came. Shapes writhed in the distance, their forms impossible, their movements both serpentine and jagged.

***"But what will change this time?"***

The voice's tone twisted, a strange mix of mockery and genuine curiosity.

***"What tiny threads will stray from their path, what insignificant sparks will think themselves flames?"***

The void quivered, resonating with the voice's malice, as though the abyss itself felt its ire.

***"Perhaps this time,"***

the voice mused, softer now, each word dragging like a blade across stone,

***"I'll begin with the oldest... and end with the newest."***

A low chuckle followed, hollow and bitter, the sound reverberating endlessly.

A moment passed, then another, before the voice continued, each word laced with venom.

***"Or perhaps, this time, it will end before it begins. Perhaps the threads will fray, the cycle will unravel, and the silence I crave will finally be mine."***

The void shifted violently, the ripples turning into waves of dissonance, distorting the very fabric of the space. Symbols flared to life, glowing faintly before shattering, leaving behind nothing but echoes of screams that weren't there.

***"Peace,"***

the voice whispered, dripping with mockery and longing all at once.

***"A fitting irony, don't you think? To bring destruction, so I may find peace."***

The void grew still again, unnervingly so, as if reality itself held its breath. Then came the final words, spoken not as a statement, but as an undeniable truth.

***"This time, there will be no salvation. Only silence."***

The presence faded, or perhaps it never was. The void returned to its unnatural stillness, yet the air still thrummed with the echo of malice. Somewhere in the endless expanse of nothingness, something ancient stirred, patient and unrelenting, watching.

**Waiting.**

